

# Congressional Support For Our Military and their Families

*Today, America is demanding much of her soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. However, they still face deteriorating living and working facilities, and pay and benefits that lag behind the private sector. Our nation needs to do more to support hardworking U.S. service members. Therefore, Congress authorized quality of life initiatives including increases to military pay, enhancements to critical benefits such as health care and education, improvements to living and working facilities.*

## ***Pay and Bonuses***

**Basic Military Pay.** Congress authorized an across-the-board 4.1 percent pay increase for military personnel, the fourth largest increase since 1982. In addition, Congress authorized targeted increases of up to 6.5 percent for mid-grade and senior noncommissioned officers and mid-grade officers.

**Housing Allowance.** Congress authorized the President's request to reduce the average amount of housing expenses paid by service members from the current 11.3 percent to 7.5 percent in fiscal year 2003, and to eliminate the out-of-pocket expense completely by fiscal year 2005.

**Active Duty Special Pay and Bonuses.** Congress extended several special pays and bonuses for active duty personnel through December 31, 2003, including:

- enlistment and reenlistment bonuses;
- aviation officer retention bonus;
- special pay for nuclear qualified officers extending their period of active service;
- nuclear career accession bonus;
- nuclear career annual incentive bonus;
- accession bonuses for dental officers and registered nurses;
- incentive pay for nurse anesthetists;
- nurse officer candidate accession program;
- accession bonus for new officers in critical skills; and
- retention bonus for members with critical skills (in addition, Congress authorized eliminating caps on bonus amounts and extending years of eligibility for bonuses for health care providers).

**Assignment Incentive Pay.** Congress authorized the service secretaries to award an incentive pay of up to \$1,500 per month to personnel serving in assignments involving difficult working conditions or undesirable overseas locations.

**Health Care Professional Special Pays.** Congress increased the maximum rates for certain special pays and bonuses for health care professionals from:

- \$14,000 to \$50,000 multi-year retention bonus for certain medical officers and dentists;
- \$15,000 to \$50,000 special pay for nurse anesthetists;
- \$36,000 to \$50,000 incentive special pay for medical officers;
- \$5,000 to \$30,000 accession bonus for registered nurses;
- \$12,000 to \$15,000 annual special pay for pharmacy officers; and
- \$6,000 to \$15,000 retention special pay for optometrists.

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**Promoting Volunteerism Through the Armed Services.** In an effort to encourage Americans to serve their nation, Congress established a National Service Plan with incentives to enlist in the armed forces. Volunteers must serve 15 months on active duty, followed by either an additional active duty period determined by the Secretary of Defense or 24 months in an active status in the Selected Reserve. If time still remains of the individual's service obligation, he or she may serve on active duty, in the Selected or Ready Reserve, in a national service program such as the Peace Corps or Americorps, or in some combination of these programs. Participants must meet all eligibility requirements for military service and may choose one of the following incentives:

- \$5,000, payable after completing 15 months of active duty;
- repayment of student loans up to \$18,000;
- an educational allowance at the Montgomery GI Bill monthly rate for one year; or
- an educational allowance of one-half of the GI Bill monthly rate for three years.

**Reserve Forces Special Pay and Bonuses.** Congress extended certain special pays and bonuses for reserve personnel through December 31, 2003 (except as noted), including:

- special pay for health care professionals who serve in the selected reserve in critically short wartime specialties;
- selected reserve enlistment and reenlistment bonuses;
- special pay for selected reserve enlisted personnel who are assigned to certain high priority units;
- ready reserve enlistment and reenlistment bonus;
- selected reserve affiliation bonus;
- prior service enlistment bonus, increased from:
  - \$5,000 to \$8,000 for members who enlist for six years;
  - \$2,500 to \$4,000 for members who enlist for three years;
  - \$2,000 to \$3,500 for members who received prior bonuses for a three-year enlistment and enlist for an additional three years;
- authority for repayment of educational loans for certain health professionals who serve in the selected reserve (extended to January 1, 2004); and
- reduction for minimum service from eight to six years required before qualifying for retirement pay (made permanent).

**Subsistence Allowance.** Military personnel based at remote locations or at installations with inadequate or no dining facilities must buy their food from the local economy. While officers and married enlisted personnel receive a subsistence allowance to help with the cost of food prepared in their residences, many single enlisted personnel stationed at remote locations reside in government quarters with no food storage or preparation facilities. Therefore, Congress authorized doubling the regular basic allowance for subsistence for single enlisted personnel stationed in remote locations.

### ***Benefits***

**Assistance for Families of Service Members.** Capitalizing on lessons learned during the Persian Gulf War, Congress made permanent the temporary authority to provide child care, education, and other youth services assistance to the families of active duty personnel.

**Emergency Leave of Absence.** There are times when service members need extended leave for family or personal hardships. In order to prevent service members in such situations from entering into unearned or excessive leave status, Congress authorized the service secretaries to grant a one-time leave of absence of up to 14 days to service members with qualifying emergencies.

**Health Care Sharing.** The \$40 billion that DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will spend on health care in 2002 is not enough to meet the needs of current and former service members and their families. Increased sharing of health care resources between DOD and VA can maximize efficiency and reduce the costs of health care. As such, Congress included provisions to facilitate improved, mutually beneficial health care sharing by requiring DOD and VA to:

- enter into agreements to exchange health care resources, develop guidelines for the implementation of sharing recommendations, and establish and jointly fund a DOD-VA health executive committee and an incentives program to foster creative coordination and sharing initiatives at the facility, intraregional, and nationwide levels;
- adopt an interoperable, real-time pharmacy data system that would enable DOD and VA to exchange outpatient medication information; and
- conduct a health care resources sharing coordination project, at three sites or more, to test the health care sharing improvement programs.

**Improving the Montgomery GI Bill for the Reserves.** Under current law, members of the selected reserve may use Montgomery GI Bill benefits for as many as ten years after becoming eligible. The conferees extended this period to 14 years.

**Reforming the TRICARE Process.** Impediments in the TRICARE system limit patients' access to health care and discourage medical providers from participating in TRICARE programs. As such, the Congress authorized provisions to improve access to care for TRICARE and TRICARE for Life (TFL) patients, including:

- **Expanding TRICARE Prime Remote.** Under current law, a dependent whose sponsor is assigned to a remote location (more than 50 miles or one hour's drive from the nearest medical facility) is entitled to TRICARE Prime Remote benefits only if they also reside with the service member. However, this benefit does not apply to those dependents whose sponsors are reassigned to an unaccompanied permanent duty station, such as Korea. Therefore, Congress extended TRICARE Prime Remote benefits to dependents who remain in a remote location when they cannot accompany their sponsor. In addition, Congress extended TRICARE Prime Remote benefits to dependents of remotely located reserve personnel when the member is ordered to active duty for more than 30 days.
- **Reforming the Claims Process.** In response to growing concerns about the stability of TRICARE provider networks and the requirements of TRICARE claims processing, Congress required that TRICARE claims requirements be substantially the same as Medicare claims requirements.
- **TRICARE Provider Certification.** Currently, certified Medicare providers who treat TFL patients (over age 65) cannot treat TRICARE patients (under age 65) unless they are further certified as TRICARE providers. This administrative requirement deters some providers from participating in the TRICARE program. As such, Congress required that medicare-approved health care providers be treated as approved TRICARE providers for new and existing TRICARE contracts.

**Shipboard Hazard and Defense Program (SHAD) Disclosure.** The SHAD program, part of the Cold War-era Project 112, tested the effects of chemical and biological attacks on U.S. military vessels, aircraft, and thousands of American service members. Some veterans who participated in the tests may not know that they may have been exposed to potentially harmful substances, while many who are aware of the dangers believe that their health has been affected. Every service member who was subjected to SHAD tests should be notified of their participation in order to evaluate their health. Therefore, Congress required the Secretary of Defense to develop a plan to review and declassify all medically relevant information on Project 112 and SHAD within one year, and to identify participants so that the Veterans Administration may notify them and deliver proper benefits and care. In addition, Congress required that the Government Accounting Office review the Secretary's plan.

**Special Compensation for the Combat Disabled.** Congress authorized new payments to be made to all military retirees whose disability resulted from a combat injury or wound for which they were awarded a Purple Heart. In addition, Congress authorized military retirees whose 60 percent or greater disability resulted from combat-related activities (as determined by criteria set by the Secretary of Defense). Such activities would include, for example, injuries received in live fire training exercises. The range payment DOD would be authorized to make could range from \$103 to \$2,160. In addition, Congress continued payment of a special stipend ranging from \$50 to \$300 per month to approximately 33,000 severely disabled military retirees with a VA rating of 60 percent or higher. Although these provisions do not benefit the entire disabled retiree community, Congress believe that this is another significant step towards amending the concurrent receipt law.

**Travel and Transportation Benefit.** In order to improve the travel and transportation benefit available to service members, Congress authorized service members serving in a second consecutive overseas tour to defer expenses-paid transportation and travel benefits until the second tour is completed. If a service member cannot travel because of participation in a contingency operation, benefits may be deferred for one year after the contingency operation duty ends. In addition, military personnel who extend an overseas tour currently receive travel and transportation benefits only to and from the nearest port of entry. Congress authorized travel to the nearest port of entry within the 48 contiguous states, or an alternate location that does not exceed the travel costs to the nearest port of entry.

**Use of Commissaries by National Guard.** Under current law, the thousands of National Guard members who are called to duty for national emergencies, such as those serving in Operation Noble Eagle under state-controlled status, are not eligible for commissary privileges. Therefore, Congress authorized commissary privileges to National Guard members who are participating in federally declared national emergencies.

### ***Improving Living and Working Facilities***

*The President's request for the fiscal year 2003 military construction and family housing budget fell short of the levels necessary to maintain the military's infrastructure. In an effort to improve living and working conditions for military personnel and their families, the conferees authorized \$10.4 billion (\$740 million more than the President's request), including nearly \$2.3 billion for quality-of-life enhancements. Highlights of the Congress' recommendations include:*

- **Troop Housing.** Congress authorized \$1.2 billion (\$15.4 million and four buildings more than the President's request) for the construction of 52 new barracks and dormitories to support unaccompanied military personnel.

- **Military Family Housing.** Congress authorized \$676.6 million (\$15.9 million more than the President's request) for construction and improvement of 3,437 units and the privatization of over 30,000 units.
- **Medical Facilities.** Congress authorized \$83.8 million (matching the President's request) for the construction of three medical facilities.
- **Fitness Centers.** Congress authorized \$64 million (\$4.3 million and one more than the President's request) for eight fitness centers.
- **Schools for DOD Dependents.** Congress authorized \$61 million (matching the President's request) for the construction and improvement of classrooms and education facilities.
- **Religious Facilities.** Congress authorized \$17.8 million (the President did not request any funds) for the construction of three religious facilities.
- **Child Development Centers.** Congress authorized \$17.6 million (\$6.9 million and one more than the President's request) for three child development centers.

### ***Educating the Children of Service Members***

**Education Funding.** Congress authorized \$1.6 billion (matching the President's request) for DOD Dependent schools, which educate more than 100,000 military children each year.

**Impact Aid.** The Department of Education's Impact Aid program provides supplemental funds to school districts nationwide to support the education of approximately 600,000 military children. Congress authorized \$35 million for Impact Aid spending, including \$5 million to support local agencies that aid DOD dependents with severe disabilities.